An Episode of the North West Rebellion, (1885)

This intensely interesting and informative account was written by George Johnstone Kinnaird, born at Dundee 1855, died at Edmonton 1922. Mr. Kinnaird came to Canada in the service of the Hudson Bay Company in 1877, and in 1883, at the age of 28, was placed in charge of the post at Fort Ellice, which was near the present town of Lazare , Manitoba, on the Assiniboine River, eight miles from the present Saskatchewan border. This account was found among his papers by his son George David Kenneth Kinnaird, formerly of Edmonton, now of Victoria , who recently sent it to me.

It does not appear when or on what occasion this account was written. Possibly it was a draft for a letter; if so the correspondent was obviously another Western oldtimer, but one who had not been at Ft. Ellice in 1885, or in Boulton's Scouts. Possibly the account was written for Frank Oliver, the editor of the Edmonton "Bulletin", who had been in Edmonton during the Rebellion of 1885, having come to the West before the CPR had reached Fort Ellice, and so had probably camped there.

Since the word "camouflage" occurs in the account, it must have been written after about 1915, when this word was first used by English speakers. Although this was some 30 years after the events described, the language and spirit of the account leave no doubt that Mr. Kinnaird remembered accurately and fully these episodes. His memory was certainly refreshed many times in the intervening years by talks with my father, and possibly others in Edmonton who had been through the Riel Rebellion.

My uncle Sidney George Fisher, born at Millwood (Islington), Ontario, 1858, died at Saskatoon, 1951, had gone West in 1879, and took up a homestead near the present town of Russell, Manitoba. His younger brother Frederick

Thomson Fisher, my father, born at Millwood in 1863, died at Montreal 1936, joined him in 1880 (at the age of 17) and settled on the adjoining homestead, on the east bank of the Assiniboine, 15 miles north of Fort Ellice. The neighboring village is still called Millwood.

My father and Mr. Kinnaird were lifelong friends, and this friendship must have begun at Fort Ellice in 1883, when Mr. Kinnaird was 28 and my father was 20 years old. The Col. Boulton whom Mr. Kinnaird mentions was another homesteader, who lived 15 or 20 miles north of the Fisher brothers' homesteads. My father was with Boulton as a sergeant, and must have been one of the party who were equipped and later demobilized at Fort Ellice.

Mr. Kinnaird left Fort Ellice and went to Edmonton in the Company's service in 1886. My father went to Edmonton and joined the Hudson Bay Company about 1895, surely as a result of his friendship ten years earlier with Mr. Kinnaird. Some years later he left the Company's service to become Secretary of the Edmonton Board of Trade, and Mr. Kinnaird resigned to practice as a chartered accountant; his firm became one of the best known in the West. Mr. Kinnaird died at Edmonton in 1922. My father lived in Edmonton until 1936, when he moved to Montreal; he died shortly after. There are now neither Kinnairds nor Fishers on the Western plains.

S. T. Fisher,
Montreal,
26 November 1966.

Corrected
8 December 1966.

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You ask where I was at the time of the Rebellion: I was at Fort Ellice, worse luck, but too busily engaged in the equipment of Boulton's Scouts when the fuss began and later on I had my hands full in another way or I might have had a more active part in the game, which would have been more to my liking.

You know Fort Ellice I suppose, probably camped there on the way west in the old days? It was some place then although it has almost dropped off the map in later years. In the early eighties it was the terminus of Steamboat navigation on the Assiniboine and the steamboats were only competitors in the carrying of trade with the Red River cart; all summer long the screechings of the ungreased wheels were more frequent sounds then the steamboat whistle. All the imports for a large section of the western country were gathered into it's warehouses for reshipment by carts, after these had discharged their loads of furs, buffalo robes, and pemmican for exportation, by boat or by cart as the case may be. In addition to this transhipment business, it was the most important place of call for the hunters, traders, freighters and settlers on their way to and from the Saskatchewan and the western plains.

Fort Ellice, however, was on the wane already when I took charge of the post in 1883. The fast dwindling herds of buffalo were already too far from that base, homesteaders had been trooping in for some years, the C. P. Railway was under construction and already operating to farther west points, the river traffic had dropped to an occasional steamboat whose arrival was an event of some importance, and the Red River cart was being shouldered out by the buckboard and the lumber waggon.

Civilization of course, was somewhat crude and novel and interesting to the new settlers, but as I had already been eight years in the country and the novelty had worn off, I found it rather monotonous at times and the rumour of war was almost a welcome diversion. It seemed so at first, at least from a selfish view point, but the consideration of the consequences was so appalling that gratification gave place to anxiety. As yet we were far removed from the outer world, the savage population was far more numerous than the whites and certainly more warlike, if they threw in their lot with the rebels, the situation would be desperate before effective help could reach us. Whatever could be accomplished on the inside must first be done to stem the tide and hold things in check until help could arrive. There was plenty to be done and monotonous days would be forgotten in the doing of it.

My friend, Major (afterwards Colonel) Boulton of Shell River, was early in the field. He raised a corps of mounted rifles from the adventurous young settlers who responded to his call like guests to a wedding breakfast. A fine lot of men they were and afterwards gave a good account of themselves at Fish Creek, were some of them lost the number of their mess. In a surprisingly short time their ranks were filled, horses rounded up from the plough and the pasture and converted into charges, and equipment in saddles, cartridge belts and rifles, supplied without any regard to uniformity of pattern. Uniform they had none, each provided his own clothing, but most of them had riding breeches and those that did not have cowboy stetson hats to start with weren't long in making a purchase when the opportunity offered. Blankets and haversacks were supplied them at Ellice which was their point of assembly. When lined up they had quite a smart appearance. Both drill and discipline were very defective, in fact almost a negligible quantity, but they could ride and they could shoot and there wasn't any cold feet in the outfit. At a very early stage I think they might safely have been pitted against three times the number of the enemy.

As I remarked before, I had a busy time outfitting them. Saddles, bridles, blankets, haversacks, cartridge belts, and Winchesters were requisitioned for from all sources. It was some job assembling these things but it was done and the tally was complete when the troop fell in, in marching order, the morning after their arrival. I felt that I had earned the position of quartermaster and might have had it for the asking. I would have been tickled to death to have taken it and would have ridden off very gleefully but (all my life I have been hoodooed with buts when ever I had an opportunity for real enjoyment) there was something else to do and there appeared to be no one else to do it.

Boulton's Troopers filed into Fort Ellice like a bunch of school boys let out to play, their worries must have all been locked up in their old kit bags and the keys dropped into the river where they crossed on the ferry. We had a smoking concert that night and to hear these fellows roar their heads off made me green with envy. Next day when they rode off, I was blue, a peculiar change in colour scheme no doubt, but I can assure you there was no camouflage externally.

About 1860 or perhaps earlier, a band of Sioux Indians settled on the Assiniboine River, a little below the mouth of the Birdtail Creek, a short distance from Fort Ellice. They came from the American side of the line certainly and I am of the opinion that they fled the country after the Minnesota massacre, in which they had taken part. Be this as it may, they had the reputation of being peaceful and loyal in our country; we found them reliable and trustworthy in all their dealings with us, some of them being our best and most honest hunters whose advances were always paid and accordingly they were always welcomed visitors at the Fort.

They were presumed to be Christianized, and had a pastor of their own, resident amongst them, but I dont think that they took their Christianity very seriously. They always kept themselves aloof from their hereditary enemies, the Saulteaux and Crees, very much to the approval of these tribes, who have a lively recollection of the terrors inspired by the valour and ferocity of the more warlike Sioux on occasional meetings on buffalo hunting trips. A young buck named Chaska, spoke English and acted interpreter. Chaska was a good horseman and made several trips to Carleton with Chief Factor McDonald for the H. B. Council meetings, driving twenty horses used for relays for the Chief Factors buckboard, in a rapid and almost continuous journey, the fagged team being turned out to run free and a fresh pair put in. The Chief of the tribe, Makpaodoote, (or something near that) which means "A clown" (but he was no fool), a big powerful man, well up in years, was Chaska's uncle. We only had two mails a week from Moosomin, a new town then, thirty miles west on the C. P. R. and the news we got by newspapers and letters was unsatisfactory as well as slow.

The Indians have ways of their own of getting news and were as well posted as we were, if not better. I believe they knew before we did that Big Bear had dug up the hatchet, and there was a good deal of unrest amongst them. The Saulteaux have a large reserve across the river from Ellice; I had not any reason to suspect trouble from them as they were never troublesome, but the Crooked Lake indians (between Ellice and Qu'Appelle) were a troublesome lot and only the previous year had been on the verge of open rebellion, which might easily be stirred up again although at that time it had only been a local matter. The Crees and Saulteaux have some family connection and have always lived on friendly terms with each others. There is no doubt whatever that messages from the rebels had been received and the question of war or peace discussed in the inner Council on most, if not all, the Indian reserves. The Sioux of course were out of all this but none the less interested, their fighting instincts were roused and they were in a very receptive mood for war. I had repeated delegations from them waiting on me. Was it true that the Crees were on the war path? and that the Saulteaux were ready to join them and if so, did we want any help to put them down? These were the questions they asked and they were always coupled with protestations of their own loyalty. To all this I would answer that the rumours were greatly exaggerated, the Crees and Saulteaux had more sense than think they could fight the whole of Canada and the British Empire beyond the seas, we had countless thousands of real soldiers always ready to fight and railways and steamboats to bring them on and pour them into the country in such numbers as to wipe them off the face of the earth if need be, but that wasn't the sort of thing we wanted to do; we would prefer to live in peace side by side with Indians of all nations. The Sioux knew that the Government had always treated them well and that the other Indians had equally good treatment and that the Crees and Saulteaux knew that too, as well as they did; they were not all fools like old Big Bear to listen to Riel and his rebel half breeds who had never been real friends of theirs; the present war was only a small matter and wouldn't come near us anyhow and they would soon hear of Big Bear and Riel running away like whipped dogs, the same way they did fifteen years before. This line of argument had a pacific effect and when it was supplemented with tea and tobacco, in liberal quantities, the Sioux braves would return home in a happier frame of mind. They went away with the impression that we were more concerned about fun than fighting, as we invariably wound up with a dance, in which there were no war antics. I know that my efforts were faithfully supported by the pastor, the Reverend Moses, something-or-other, who was really a good soul and a man of peace, and must have had a hard time with his flock just then. I was at some pains to circulate the information amongst the Saulteaux that they had better keep quiet if they wanted to keep their scalplocks

safe from the Sioux knives, that I was a very good friend of theirs and would protect them as far as I could and as long as they made it justifiable and refrained from exciting them too far. This undoubtedly had a good effect upon them for the Saulteaux were subdued and peaceful all that Spring and Summer, in spite of the rumours from the seat of war.

This sort of thing was not too congenial a job for me you may be sure and there were times when war was a more pleasent dream than diplomacy, especially after the news of Fish Creek battle in which a few of my personal friends in Boulton's Scouts went under, and again after the surrender of Fort Pitt, when my friend F. J. McLean and his family became prisioners in the enemies' hands. I relieved Mr. McLean of his charge at Fort Ellice in 1883 when he was transferred to the Saskatchewan District to take over the charge of Fort Pitt. I had attacks of war fever as severe as any experienced by my Sioux friends and a punative expedition on my own account "a la D'Annuzio at Fiume" or perhaps rather "à la Henry Gow at the North Inch of Perth" would have been more to my liking. It would have been a simple matter to have started the Sioux on the war path after Big Bear and, although I could hardly go the length of donning a Sioux war bonnet, I could have sported a black cock feather very gaily and played for my own hand like sturdy Hal o' the Wynde. It might~~ened~~ not by just or fair to blame McLean for the surrender of Fort Pitt, he certainly had an anxious time before he gave up and no doubt acted as he thought in the best interest of those whose lives depended upon his action, but if the inner history of the Hudson's Bay Company is ever written, it will be found that there is more than one parallel case where the fortitude and tenacity of the Fort commander, has stood out against and triumphed over the red man in as tight a corner. I feel quite confident that had my own old Chief, Archibald McDonald, held the fort on that occasion; "Another sight had seen that morn, From fate's dark book a leaf bean torn and Flodden had been Bannockburn." It is vain however, to grouse over the spilt milk of might-have-beens. Archie was not there and neither was I, my war dreams fevers were dispelled by whisperings of conscience more potent than quinine and I played the game accordingly to rule. I received no war medal but Archie said I did very well, which like the "Well done" of the Navy, is about all the praise which the service awards but is very proudly remembered.

In that war as in every other, we blundered through somehow and came out all right in the end. After all, there were no serious happenings in my neighbourhood, the anxious months went by and things quietened down. The Sioux pulse got back to normal under the soothing influence of much tea and tobacco and one fine morning in summer, Boulton's Scouts rode in almost as gaily as they left but, alas, "not the six hundred" and demobillization was almost as rapid as enrollment. Fort Ellice too was demobilized or at least went into the first stages of dismemberment prior to being abandoned. I did not see the end of it however, as I was moved along the line. Most of the following summer I was at Fort Pelly and in the fall of 1886, I was transferred to Edmonton where I have since become a fixture.

Geo J Kinnaird

Found by GDKK among his father's papers.
Read by STF 28 Nov 1966